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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [SENV](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: TIBETAN UNIVERSITY DEAN ON SELF-RESPECT, CULTURE, LANGUAGE,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT

REF: 08 CHENGDU 247 AND PREVIOUS

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CLASSIFIED BY: David E. Brown, Consul General, U.S. Consulate  
General Chengdu, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (e)

11. (C) Summary: Tibetan youth in China are "demoralized" by the lack of higher education opportunities in their native language that limit their participation in modern society, the consequent lack of standardized scientific and technical vocabulary in the Tibetan language, and erosion of traditional culture among ethnic minorities, ethnic Tibetan university dean Badeng Nima (protect) told Consul General. Nima publishes new Tibetan scientific textbooks, creates cultural preservation centers among the ethnic Qiang people of western Sichuan, and does fieldwork on the state of Tibetan-language education in China. During his travels in rural Sichuan, he hears ever more frequent stories of conflict between Tibetans and PRC officials over development projects that are damaging the environment. End Summary.

12. (C) Consul General and PolEconOff met January 11 with Badeng Nima (protect), Dean of The Institute of International Education at Sichuan Normal University, the first ethnic Tibetan university dean in China, and with British anthropologist David Burnett, whom Nima met while a visiting scholar at the Institute of Education at the University of London in 2001, and who now works with Nima at Sichuan Normal's Institute of Education. Nima and Burnett are engaged in a range of activities among the Tibetan and Qiang peoples of western Sichuan ranging from linguistic modernization, to cultural preservation. (Comment: The Qiang are heavily influenced by Tibetan culture; some Tibetans claim the Qiang are Tibetans, while some Qiang insist on their separate identity among China's 56 nationalities (minzu), which are defined according to a variety of political and ethnological considerations. End Comment.)

China's First Ethnic Tibetan University Dean

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13. (C) Discussing how he came to be China's first ethnic Tibetan university dean, Nima said he first was asked to be a higher official in his hometown of Ganzi, in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, but declined, saying he preferred to remain in education. The government wanted him to become deputy prefecture administrator (fu zhouzhang), and also offered him the post of advisor to the Sichuan Government.

Nima refused the Ganzi job because he "wouldn't be able to say anything" as a non-Communist Party member. He accepted the advisor position, however, because it is not a "real" position -- while he does not provide any actual advice, at times he can obtain materials because of the job's title, he said.

#### Tibetan Language Education Options Slim

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¶4. (C) Nima shared with us a research paper that he wrote entitled "Being Tibetan in the People's Republic of China," based on field interviews with ethnic Tibetans in Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces. In the paper, Nima wrote that "what all of the respondents hold in common is the view that the total disregard of Tibetan language in the school curriculum means that students who undertake serious study of the Tibetan language and culture are fundamentally unemployable after graduation." Nima explained that schools providing some form of Tibetan language education in China generally fall into two categories:

-- boarding schools for children of nomadic families where instruction is provided in Tibetan (other than a single course in Chinese language) using a Chinese curriculum and direct translations of Chinese textbooks; and,

-- day schools where Chinese is the primary language of instruction but extra courses in Tibetan are added.

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¶5. (C) Nima reports that schools of the first type are unattractive to Tibetans because of their heavy use of Chinese curriculum, but poor nomadic families cannot afford private education. Schools of the second type, he continued, often result in Tibetan students lagging behind their Chinese peers because Chinese is the primary language of instruction and that many such Tibetan students who are foregoing some Chinese language courses to study Tibetan already lag behind their native speaker ethnic Han classmates in reading and writing Chinese.

¶6. (C) None of the schools in Tibetan areas "really" belong to Tibetans, Nima argued. Rather, they all belong to the government. Nima guessed that only about 10 percent of Tibetan children in ethnically Tibetan areas outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) use Tibetan as their primary language of study, though the figure may be as high as 15 percent in the TAR. Nima noted that in his interviews, 95 percent of parents said they are teaching their children to speak Tibetan, though 80-90 percent also said they want their children to attend Chinese schools so they can find jobs.

#### Creating a Tibetan Science Vocabulary

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¶7. (C) Nima hopes to use his university position, which he chose because it is "safe," to help educate younger generations of

Tibetans. China's minorities need help building up their self-respect, Burnett interjected, and many young Tibetans are "demoralized." One solution is to help the younger generation "link in" to modern society and maintain their social identity by encouraging use of Tibetan. One of the institute's projects, therefore, has been the publication of six volumes of Tibetan textbooks for primary and middle school children that explain the natural sciences using the Tibetan language.

¶8. (C) The authors used three methods to create a new Tibetan science vocabulary in the volumes: 1) use old concepts to convey new meanings, 2) create new concepts by combining components of existing ones, and 3) using direct transliteration of English scientific terms in cases where methods one and two fail. The project will also help Tibetan children learn English by allowing them to study the natural sciences through their own language, Burnett added. Using funds from the Carnegie Foundation, from a Norwegian benefactor, and UK publishing house Dorling Kindersley, the institute has provided copies of the volumes to schools at no charge, but the funds are now depleted. More funds are needed for a revised edition, Nima continued, that would include improved translations and include pictures.

#### Cultural Preservation Among the Qiang

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¶9. (C) Nima and Burnett are also involved in cultural preservation activities among the Qiang people of Western Sichuan, a PRC ethnic minority technically distinct from, although heavily influenced by the Tibetans, who like the Tibetans speak a language this is in the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Qiang were particularly hard hit by the effect of the 2008 earthquake which was centered in their home area in the southern part of the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. Nima and Burnett's work seeks to "try to make old Tibetan culture useful for modern society," Nima said, by attempting to restore or revitalize traditional village activities like festivals and dancing. They received RMB 500,000 in 2009 (about USD 75,000) from the PRC State Council to conduct a three-year project, which was also funded by Sichuan University, China Southwest Minorities University, and Chinese Electronic Science and Technology University.

¶10. (C) Nima and the institute are working to set up cultural centers in villages, he reported, as in many villages there are perhaps only a handful of elders who are old enough to remember

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traditional dances and other cultural activities such as pottery making. The goal of the centers is to help the Qiang feel proud of Qiang and Tibetan culture. As much as 30 percent of traditional culture may have been lost, Nima guessed. The institute has funded four such institutes so far, with hopes to have villagers take ownership of the projects. Chinese officials and some Tibetans see these centers as useful for making money from tourism, but Nima sees their main importance as a means to preserve cultural identity. The cultural centers fit with the government's policy of building a new socialist countryside ("shehuizhuyi xin nongcun jianshe"), Nima said, which provides political cover, he added.

#### Environmental Practices Causing Conflicts

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¶11. (C) In the course of their work, Nima and Burnett have encountered growing frustration on the part of Tibetan villagers toward government projects the locals deem harmful to the environment, and report that the frequency of these conflicts is increasing. Near the first bend of the Yellow River, near Danba, conflicts are occurring between the government and Tibetans over proposed plans for hydroelectric dams. Tibetans are upset that the government sold rights to their grasslands to national energy companies such as Huaneng.

¶12. (C) In a 2008 case in Yading, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, home of the Yading Nature Reserve, tourists previously would walk along a stretch of river through a local village en route to visiting snow-capped mountains, allowing villagers to sell goods and water and to rent out horses. Local government officials, seeking higher revenues, sold rights to a company from Zhejiang Province to erect a gondola up the mountain, bypassing the village. In another 2008 case, local officials allowed a Chinese company to start work on a silicon mine in Daofu, over objections by locals that the mining site was a holy mountain, Nima said.

¶13. (C) In both instances, police, retired PLA soldiers, or thugs were brought in by officials to harass locals, and there were even some rumors of deaths in these incidents, Nima said. When news of the incidents reached the international press, the Chinese government accused local Tibetans of inciting an independence movement and thus causing further conflicts. These incidents, according to Nima, were part of the mix of problems that led to the March 2008 unrest in Tibetan areas (reftels). (Note: Nima, in his paper referenced earlier, noted that in his interviews with Tibetans, most felt that a violent confrontation with China over the future of Tibet was unavoidable. End Note.)  
BROWN